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## Contextualising Policy Enactment in Regional, Rural and Remote Australian Schools: A Review of the Literature.

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### ABSTRACT

Education policies are enacted differently according to school contexts and geographies. This is particularly the case in large countries such as Australia where context and geographies for schooling differ greatly. Within regional, rural and remote Australia, schools are witnessing a trend in geographic disadvantage in that as distance from urban centres increase, nationally benchmarked scores tend to decrease. Overcoming this geographic disadvantage has become a national goal for policy makers; however, policies fail to fully consider regional, rural and remote context. This study aims to review literature regarding the contextual factors that affect policy enactment in regional, rural and remote Australian schools. 49 journal articles, national reviews, books and policy documents were identified, read and reviewed. The literature confirms that context is an important consideration in policy enactment. Findings reveal that educational policy enactment is impacted by four major contextual factors: (1) situational context, (2) professional context, (3) material context and (4) external context. These factors have been used as a thematic organiser in this review to understand policy enactment in RRR schools specifically. This literature review concludes that context needs to be at the forefront of policy enactment in RRR areas. Policies need to be enacted within place, using community participation to be effective. This research is a fruitful endeavour as there is a need to contextualise not only policies, but also pedagogy and practice.

**Keywords:** rural education, context, policy, policy enactment

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Contextualising Policy Enactment in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia**

The Australian education system comprises of three education sectors: government run public schools, Catholic schools and independent schools. The majority of Australia's students attend public schools where state and territory governments have primary responsibility for policy, funding and delivery of school education (Halsey, 2018). Although the federal government plays a lead role in national policy development, state and territory governments determine policies

regarding school organisation and curriculum development (Halsey, 2018). Once policies are developed and disseminated, schools are responsible for enacting them.

Policy enactment is a creative and dynamic process of interpreting and translating often decontextualised policy ideas into contextualised practice (Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011; Singh, Heimans, & Glasswell, 2014). Educators often mistake policy enactment for policy implementation; however, Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) note that “*implementation*” is generally a “*top-down*” process (p.6). Implementation denotes that “*policy making and policy makers tend to assume ‘best possible’ environments... ideal buildings, students, teachers and even resources*” (Ball et al., 2012, p.6). In contrast, enactment means that diverse variables and factors in schools are considered as well as the dynamics of context (Ball et al., 2012). Policy enactment is a sense making process that involves school community members reading, writing and talking about policies and enactment processes through the actualities of the school’s context (Barrera, 2013; Braun et al., 2011). This means that the school community become actors in the policy process. As policy makers are both receivers and agents of policy, this means understanding their role in the policy process. Ball et al., 2012 state

*much of policy interpretation genre tends to take all actors in the policy process to be equal, with the exception of school leaders who are given particular attention, and seen to be working on and with policy in similar ways – as receivers and agents (p. 49).*

School leaders play a pivotal role in this process. Leaders can empower teachers to become active agents when enacting policies. They are instrumental in leading interpretation, translation and enactment processes in schools (Sullivan & Morrison, 2014).

During the interpretation phase of enactment, schools ask themselves what does this policy mean to us? What do we have to do? Do we need to adapt this policy? (Ball, Maguire & Brain, 2012). Ball et al. (2012) explain

*this decoding is done in relation to the culture and history of the institution and the policy biographies of the key actors... it relates the smaller to the bigger picture; that is, institutional priorities and possibilities to political necessities... Interpretations are set within the schools’ position in relation to policy (performance levels, league table position, ratings) and the degree and type of imperative attached to any policy and the contextual limitations of budget, staff etc.” (p. 44).*

When translating policies, schools put policies into action through meetings, informal conversations, plans, events and producing documents and artefacts that draw on ideas and practices that have worked previously (Ball et al., 2012). Ball et al. (2012) also explains that lesson observations illustrate direct interplay between policy and practice and is designed to share and improve practice. These artefacts are “*cultural productions*” and serve as “*meaning makers*” that guide the social processes and enactment processes of policy in the school (Ball et al., 2012, p. 122).

Context is the result of the local conditions in which a particular school occurs (Ball et al., 2012; Boyd, 1992; Miller, 2018). Each school has a particular combination of contextual factors that provide schools with what Thomson (2000) calls “*thisness*” (p.107). Every school has unique demography, geography, resources, mobility and social structures that interact with community

attitudes, values and beliefs (Wildy, Sigurðardóttir, & Faulkner, 2014). “Context is an ‘active’ force and is not just a backdrop against which schools have to operate. Context initiates and activates policy processes and choices which are continuously constructed and developed, both from within and without, in relation to policy imperatives and expectations” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 34). School contexts vary remarkably so educational policies that have succeeded in one context can fail in another (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017; Ruiz, McMahon, & Jason, 2018). Schools construct, translate, interpret and enact policies in unique ways and in the limitations and possibilities of their own context (Braun et al., 2011; Sullivan & Morrison, 2014). This is particularly evident in geographically large places such as Australia.

In Australia, there is a clear spatial distribution of population where capital cities are located on the coastal (particularly eastern coastal) strip (Green, 2008). Schools can be hundreds or thousands of kilometres away from these metropolitan centres and therefore, their context varies greatly (Ledger, 2018). The Australian Bureau of Statistics ([ABS], 2018b) measured the amount of road travel required to reach major services and determined five levels of relative remoteness across Australia: major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote (ABS, 2018a). This paper will use the term regional, rural and remote (RRR) to discuss all areas that are not major cities.

According to national statistics, students in RRR schools are consistently underperforming on a number of national educational performance benchmarks in comparison to their metropolitan peers (Halsey, 2018). There is a direct correlation between geographical location and educational outcomes (Gonski, 2018; Halsey, 2018; Lamb & Huo, 2017; Mitchell Institute, 2015; Roberts & Green, 2013). With increasing remoteness comes decreasing achievement levels (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2017; Thomson, De Bortoli, & Underwood, 2016). This phenomenon of geographical disadvantage is one experienced in all Australian states and indicates “a long-held pattern of rural school achievement” (Roberts & Green, 2013, p. 766).

For policy makers, this pattern means that improving RRR education in Australia has become a national educational goal (Gonski, 2018; Halsey, 2018; What Works. The Work Program, 2012). According to the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council On Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) and more recently the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019), national governments are committed to promoting equity and excellence in Australian schooling, providing students with access to high-quality schooling that is inclusive and is free from any form of discrimination. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019) commits to “ensuring the education community works to provide equality of opportunity and educational outcomes for all students at risk of educational disadvantage” (p.17) which includes students from regional, rural and remote areas. In an effort to mitigate rural and remote educational disadvantage, the Australian Department of Education announced the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) to consider key issues, challenges and barriers impacting RRR students (Halsey, 2018). Since then, an Expert Advisory Group was established in 2019 to respond to the challenges and questions posed in the IRRRE and develop recommendations to help improve RRR student results (Department of Education and Training, 2019). Although some of the recommendations from these inquiries are beneficial to RRR communities, policies remain disjointed from RRR contexts.

In policy, geographic distance has become something to control and overcome (Ministerial Council On Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008; Roberts & Green, 2013). Reid et al. (2010) regard this as a “*deficit model of rural schooling*”, where RRR regions become “*problematic*” (p. 267) because they are considered lacking in comparison to urban places (Halsey, Drummond, & van Breda, 2010). According to Roberts and Green (2013),

*Rural students are (a) constructed as deficient (in comparison with non-rural students), (b) assumed to need, somehow, to become less-rural, or something ‘other’ than they are, and (c) encouraged to master, and have their achievement measured in, a curriculum that values and prioritises metro-cosmopolitan ways of being, while remaining ambivalent to rurality (p. 768).*

In policy, RRR schools are not afforded recognition as an equity group in and of themselves (Roberts & Green, 2013).

According to the IRRRRE (Halsey, 2018), “*much remains to be done to bridge the gap between the achievement and opportunities of RRR students and those most commonly associated with their urban counterparts*” (p.4). Researchers argue that administrators, educators and policy makers need to better understand the intricacies and complexities of RRR contexts, locations and communities (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010; Green, 2008; Halsey, 2018; Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer & Hutchins, 2011). This literature review aims to understand the contextual factors that influence Australian RRR schools and explain how these factors affect policy enactment. Firstly, this paper will outline the methods for data collection and analysis, describing the search parameters and main characteristics of the reviewed literature. The findings from the review will be outlined in the subsequent section and this paper will conclude with implications for educational policy, practice and research.

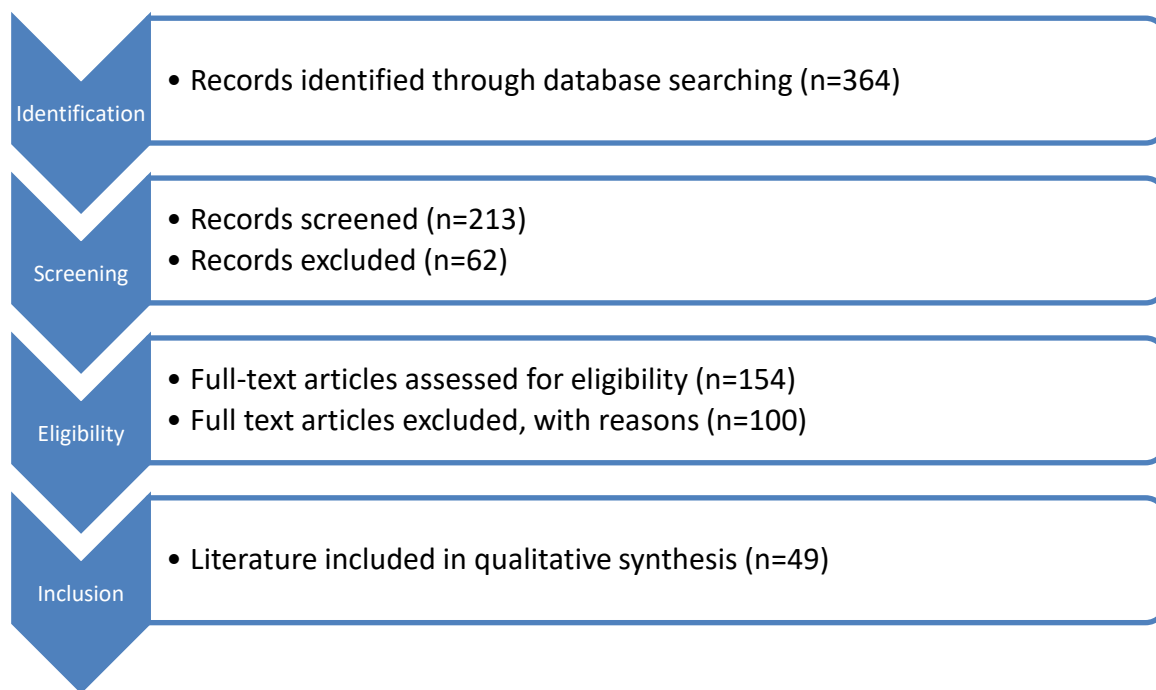
## Methodology

### Research design

This qualitative study contributes to policy analysis research. It seeks to understand the historical and cultural norms that operate in RRR school contexts and how these norms shape policy enactment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A policy enactment framework originally conceived by Braun et al., (2011) outlines four interconnected sets of contextual dimensions: (1) situated context (e.g. locale, history and location); (2) professional context (e.g. staff values and experiences and policy management); (3) material context (e.g. staffing, budget, building, available technology and infrastructure); and (4) external context (e.g. governance, state oversight and reporting frameworks, legal requirements and responsibilities, school ratings and relationships with other schools) (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2011; Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017). Singh, Heimans and Glasswell (2014) explain that this framework has been adopted and used by scholars to explain policy enactment in a variety of contexts including the US (see Koyama, 2011), Canada (see Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013), Australia (see Keddie, Mills & Pendergast, 2011), and Italy (see Grimaldi, 2012). This framework acknowledges that schools produce their own ‘take’ on policies depending on these contextual dimensions (Braun et al., 2011). It disrupts the idealism of policy and introduces the reality of RRR schools. In this literature review, this framework acts as a lens to make sense of the literature and frames the research question: what does the literature say are the contextual factors that influence policy enactment in RRR Australian schools?

## Data collection

To research this topic, a comprehensive search strategy was devised (see Figure 1) based on Creswell and Creswell (2018). The process involved identifying the purpose of the review and research question, identifying the scope of relevant literature, screening literature for inclusion, assessing the literature against eligibility criteria and including literature for synthesis.



**Figure 1: Comprehensive search strategy used to identify relevant literature for this review.**

During the identification stage from June 2018 to February 2019, peer reviewed literature was searched using Google Scholar, JCU Library OneSearch, ERIC, EBSCOHost, Informit and JSTOR. These databases were selected due to the range of available articles relevant to policy contextualisation in Australian RRR secondary schools. Titles and abstracts were searched for combinations of the keywords *policies, regional, rural and remote education and context*. In addition, bibliographies of identified articles were scanned for relevant literature. This identification process revealed 364 records.

Following the example of Sant (2019), papers were either included or excluded for synthesis according to four criteria: (a) a primary focus on the RRR context, (b) research primarily from Australia, (c) research since 1990 and (d) research relevant to policy enactment. Based on the inclusion criteria, 138 pieces of literature were read in full. After reading all literature, some articles were excluded as they did not meet all criteria. The final sample of relevant studies, policies and reviews was 49.

Additional searches were performed to clarify policy enactment as it was determined that the first search did not produce enough research to provide an adequate review of the topic. Google Scholar, JCU Library OneSearch, ERIC and EBSCOHost were used to search the terms *policy sense making, and policy enactment*. A further 16 articles, papers and books were screened, reviewed and read to determine their relevance to the aforementioned criteria. 6 articles and 2 books were

then read and coded for themes that had been determined in the previous round of systematic literature search process. Literature for this review includes evidence-based reviews, reports and peer reviewed research articles primarily from Australia and secondarily from other countries.

### **Data analysis**

The analysis process was informed by Ledger Vidovich (2018). The data analysis process involved analysing relevant literature in relation to the research question. Braun et al.'s (2011) policy enactment framework was used as a thematic organiser to understand contextual factors that influence policy enactment in RRR schools, including situated context, professional context, material context and external context. The selected suite of papers were carefully read and re-read to identify, define, analyse and categorise the literature according to Braun et al.'s (2011) framework. This process allowed further sub-themes within each contextual factor to emerge. Following Creswell and Creswell (2018), Additional rounds of read-throughs occurred and relevant literature was compiled under each emerging theme until it was determined that a comprehensive response to the research question was developed. The final phase of analysis was a synthesis of the findings, which are outlined below.

## **Results**

The following section of this paper reviews 49 studies including literature reviews, case studies, reports and phenomenologies. The findings are presented according to Braun et al.'s (2011) four contextual dimensions (1) situated context, (2) professional context, (3) material context, and (4) external context in RRR schools.

### **RRR situated context**

**School culture.** According to Halsey (2018), 47 per cent (4,400) of Australian schools are in RRR communities. These communities are often devoid of major services such as banks and post offices; therefore, the school acts as a connecting hub, becoming central to how a community sustains itself (Henderson, 2017; Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Patrinos & Fasih, 2009). In RRR communities “where everyone knows everyone” (Lock, Budgen, & Lunay, 2012, p. 130) the community is involved in the discourse of the school (Barley & Beesley, 2006; Halsey, 2018; Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Lock et al., 2012). “The school and the community are one team. We work together; we play together; and we are often related... People fill different positions, even multiple roles in school and community, but we all play for the same team” (Wildy et al., 2014, p.110). In working as a team, RRR schools adapt policies to advance the needs of the community and improve student outcomes (Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Kline, White & Lock, 2013; Patrinos & Fasih, 2009).

**Student population.** Students in RRR communities are diverse. 29.3 per cent (1, 108, 000) of Australia's full time equivalent (FTE) students attend RRR schools (ABS, 2017). These students are likely to be Aboriginal, have low socio-economic status (SES), be children of seasonal workers and be the first in their family to attend university (ABS, 2016; Henderson, 2017; Henderson & Gouwens, 2013; Roberts & Green, 2013). These students often have cultural, family or community responsibilities, meaning their aspirations beyond school are often to enable access to basics for themselves, their family and their community (Guenther, Disbray and Osborne; 2014; Parkes, McRae-Williams & Tedmanson; 2013; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Walker, 2019).

**School size.** Such a diverse and complex student population means that translating policies into practice is a challenge, particularly in small schools where multi-grade classrooms are common (Gonski, 2018; Halsey, 2018). Small schools do not qualify for administrative support in the same way as larger schools (Wildy et al., 2014). Small schools have a population of no more than 100 and account for 1,700 of Australian RRR schools. Students within these schools have learning difficulties, language barriers, disabilities and social issues (Halsey, 2018; Lock et al., 2012). Without the time and resources they need, these schools become overloaded by the breadth and depth of policies (Halsey, 2018).

### **RRR professional context**

**Leadership experience.** Being an educator in an RRR setting is highly demanding as appreciation of local knowledge and place is valued and training is required (Halsey, 2018). However, within RRR areas, many teachers and administrators are hired in desperation to fill a role, regardless of their training (Lock et al., 2012). Typically, RRR principals begin their principalship with no formal training or experience in management (Clarke & Wildy, 2011; Wildy et al., 2014). This is problematic as an RRR principal is a highly visible member of the school community who plays a crucial role in managing policies that improve RRR school outcomes (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Grootenboer & Hardy, 2017; Halsey, 2018; Lock et al., 2012; Wildy et al., 2014). In addition to fulfilling multiple social and organisational roles in the school community (e.g. organizing bus routes, coordinating staff accommodation, teaching classes and coaching sports teams), RRR school leaders are required to respond to a continually changing national education context and associated policies (Ehrich, 2000; Halsey, 2018; Lock et al., 2012; Miller, 2018; Wildy et al., 2014). RRR Principals divide their time between the classroom and the office yet are “*required to demonstrate equal compliance to centrally mandated policies*” (Wildy et al., 2014, p.105). Continually changing national priorities, limited training and lack of administrative support in RRR schools makes it difficult for leaders to demonstrate equal compliance and enactment of centrally mandated policy let alone successfully adapting these policies to suit community needs (Clarke & Wildy, 2011; Wildy et al., 2014). Consequently, leaders experience variability of policy enactment (Sullivan & Morrison, 2014).

**Understanding rurality.** For policies to be effectively enacted in RRR communities, principals and teachers need to understand RRR context and work collaboratively with community members (Byrne and Munns, 2012; Gray and Partington, 2012; Halsey, 2018; Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Walker, 2019; Wildy et al., 2014). This means understanding “*rurality*” (Hudson & Hudson, 2019, p. 7). Sharplin’s (2002) study revealed that some educators do not have a clear understanding about teaching in RRR communities: some offering notions of green, rolling hills. In Roberts’ (2013) study, one RRR teacher stated “*I didn’t learn anything about these places or teaching these kids at uni... Where was that in the degree?*” (p.94). Understanding rurality clarifies the role and identity of teachers and leaders in RRR contexts and strengthens the connectedness between RRR communities and schools (Hudson, 2019). Teachers and leader are better able to meet the needs of the community, inciting a culture of enacting policies for the community and with the community (Halsey, 2018; Wildy et al., 2014).

**Staff retention.** Attracting and, more importantly, retaining quality school leaders and teachers in RRR communities is a constant challenge. According to research from the Country Education

Project (2010), Downes and Roberts (2018) and Reid et al. (2010), when compared with urban schools, RRR schools are harder to staff; have higher teacher turnover rates; are staffed by newer, younger graduates; and more staff teaching outside their expertise. Research (see Downes & Roberts, 2018; Halsey, 2018, Lock et al., 2012; Paynter, 2018) determines teacher attrition is due to lack of access; inadequate human and physical resources; geographical, social, cultural and professional isolation; inadequate housing; lack of professional development, mentoring and induction; challenges catering for individual students' needs; unexpected conflict with colleagues; focus on teaching quality; significant education reform; changes to curriculum; and changes to university courses. Despite these challenges, there are RRR teachers who enjoy living in RRR communities due to comfortable and cheap accommodation, acceptance by the community, slower pace of living and incentives, including extended holidays, payment for relocation costs and fast track promotion opportunities (Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Lock et al., 2012). However, Halsey (2018) explains that promotion opportunities are an issue in RRR schools because rural placements advance a teacher or leader's career but they often transfer elsewhere. Principals and teachers in RRR schools are often deemed as using the RRR placement as a stepping stone into metropolitan schools (Halsey, 2018, p.18). Consequently, RRR students and policy enactment are negatively affected (Gonski, 2018; Halsey, 2018; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Hattie, 2015; Reid et al., 2010).

### **RRR material context**

**Resources.** Enacting national and state policies requires resources, professional development, funding and policies that are relevant to RRR contexts (Halsey, Drummond & van Breda., 2010). However, it is common for RRR schools to lack information, funding and accessibility to policy experts, relief staff, and time (Drummond, 2013; Halsey, 2018; Lock et al., 2012). Research determines that problems with resourcing also exist in urban schools; however, the problems that exist in RRR areas are unique (Drummond, 2013). In RRR schools it takes time to drive to nearby towns for resources or to wait for them to be mailed. Also, ICT resources and internet connectivity are problematic (Lock et al., 2012). To overcome resourcing issues in RRR schools, (Halsey et al., 2010) stresses the need for adequate physical and online resources that are “*rural and remote friendly*” (p. 6). He also acknowledges that access to adequate resources does not just mean allocating more of them; it means using existing resources more effectively (Halsey, 2018). To do this, Clarke and Wildy (2011) propose clustering schools in the same region so resources and expertise can be shared effectively between schools. Through clustering, resources can be developed that address the RRR community's specific needs.

**Policies.** RRR schools require policies that take into account the whole school context and are relevant to RRR educators and students (Halsey, 2018; Reid et al., 2010). Current policies are metro-centric and do not take RRR context into consideration (Roberts & Green, 2013; Thompson, 2013). Roberts (2019) questions the relevance of policies such as the Australian Curriculum to RRR communities: “*is it any surprise that our kids don't do as well? A lot of the questions don't have any relevance to their real lives.*” Further, Halsey (2018) cites an example of NAPLAN question asking what could be seen at a busy train station – of which many RRR students have no knowledge or experience. For this reason, Halsey (2018) states that policies should be used more as a guide to be interpreted and “*should be connected wherever possible with the community in which schools are located*” (p. 33). However, he also argues that place



based approaches to policy must connect students to wider global perspectives to ensure they emerge as active and informed citizens (Education Council, 2019; Ministerial Council On Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008).

**Professional development.** Professional development for RRR staff is crucial due to aforementioned lack of experience, professional isolation, role multiplicity and high turnover (Howely, Chadwick & Howley, 2002). Professional development builds capacity of staff, allowing them to effectively enact policies that impact student outcomes (What Works The Work Program, 2012). However, research from Lock et al. (2012) shows RRR schools generally had “higher unmet needs for professional development” (p.4). According to Sharplin (2002) and Hudson and Hudson (2019) educators expect to face challenges accessing professional development due to isolation from major urban centres where the PD takes place. Additionally, there are increased costs associated with attending professional development as travel expenses need to be reimbursed (Drummond, 2013; Hancock, 2015).

Where professional development is available, research suggests it should be specific to RRR areas (Howely et al., 2002). Participants from Lock et al.’s (2012) study note that professional development regarding teaching in RRR contexts, cultural awareness training and guidance teaching Aboriginal children would assist them in providing better quality education for their students. Current professional experience programs for preservice teachers aim to fulfil this need. Hudson and Hudson’s (2019) study found preservice teachers involved in RRR professional experience programs such as ‘*Beyond the Line*’ in New South Wales, ‘*Beyond the Range*’ in Queensland or ‘*Over the Hill*’ (Beutel, Adie & Hudson, 2011) prepare preservice teachers for working in geographically isolated areas. Preservice teachers involved in such programs indicated a greater understanding of the complexities of teaching and living in RRR areas (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). However, the problem of resourcing such programs for schools remains a challenge.

**Funding.** In Australia, state and territory governments are responsible for funding public school education and distributing national funding (Halsey, 2018). Within each jurisdiction, there are varied funding arrangements depending on school size and student demography (Gonski, 2011; Halsey, 2010). Gonski’s (2011) Review of Funding for Schooling report indicated that New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory provide specific financial support for RRR students. This funding takes the form of additional staffing, increases to a school’s base budget and grant payments (Gonski, 2011). According to Gonski (2011), state and territory governments also provide targeted funding to programs such as transport services. Although funding is made available, Rorris et al., (2011) found that funding for RRR students is low. Reid et al., (2010) argue that because policy and government funding decisions are out of the community’s control, the governments’ ability to understand exactly where funding is required is questionable. Enacting new policies in RRR contexts requires more funding as these communities have needs that go beyond the school gate (Halsey et al., 2010; Roberts, Piccoli and Hattie (2018).

### **RRR external context**

**Standardized education.** These days, policies have become more standardized and so too have educational practices (Halsey, 2018). Schools are urged to meet standardized targets and are

placed in competition with one another through the publishing of national assessment results (Kimber & Ehrich, 2011). This marketisation of schools erases the complexity of educational practice and ignores the challenges of the local school community in which policies must be enacted (Halsey, 2018; Hardy & Boyle, 2011; Lingard, Ladwig, Mills, Hayes, & Luke, 2001; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). Consequently, RRR schools are focused on meeting external demands to influence parents and community members to be consumers of their product instead of focusing on how best to adapt policies to the needs of their whole community (Kimber & Ehrich, 2011; Whitty et al., 1998). For decades, researchers such as Whitty et al., (1998) have identified that standardization is “*doing little to alleviate existing inequalities in access and participation and, in many cases, may be exacerbating them*” (p.126). More recently, studies have proven that standardization has the effect of decontextualizing schooling “*from the broader socio-economic, political and cultural settings within which it is located*” (Lingard, Creagh, & Vass, 2012, p.326), resulting in an impersonal and placeless education that does not necessarily serve students and their families (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Roberts, 2013).

**Placeless education.** According to both the *IRRRRE* and the *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, education tends to be metro-centric, highly urban and devoid of landscape (Gonski, 2018; Halsey, 2018). This one size fits all, placeless education serves to remove a lived policy away from the recognition and incorporation of RRR knowledges and experiences (Ball, 2003; Downes & Roberts, 2018; Roberts, 2013; Roberts et al., 2018; White & Corbett, 2014). Instead, all schools, regardless of context, are considered the same, revealing a “*geographical blindness*” in policy development (Roberts & Green, 2013, p. 765). Roberts and Green (2013) explain:

*what typically happens in policy and practice is that geography (i.e. Space/place) is factored out and effectively denied first-order significance. What this indicates is that geography, specifically space and place, while acknowledged as producing certain effect in terms of educational outcomes, is not considered as a significant matter in relation to equity and social justice in its own right (p. 767).*

Policies do not acknowledge geographical, historical, political, cultural and social contextual factors creating a chasm between the community and the classroom (Hogarth, 2019). “[*Policy makers*] ignore the detrimental effects of past policy and reform... because it is not their lived experience” (p. 48). However, policies that are place conscious, student focused and involves an awareness of social issues and community means that dominant social ideologies can be disrupted and RRR student outcomes can be improved (Downes & Roberts, 2018).

## Discussion

This literature review lays the foundation for understanding how RRR schools can contextualise policy enactment. The findings from 54 pieces of literature reveal four major contextual factors that influence policy enactment in RRR areas. These findings have implications for education policy, practice and research. The following section recommends implications for policy makers, educators and researchers that may assist in facilitating successful policy contextualisation in RRR settings.

### Policy

The reviewed literature confirmed that context is an important consideration in policy. However, standardisation makes it difficult for policies to be successfully adapted and enacted to suit RRR schools. Policies are developed in the state or territory's capital and are then expected to be enacted uniformly across all schools, some of which are 2,500 kilometres away. Policy makers expect policies to be implemented in the best possible environments; however, RRR communities lack physical and human resources to translate policy into practice. For schools to effectively enact policies, policy makers need to understand the dynamics of RRR context. Using a rural lens, policy makers can understand the diversity of RRR student and community needs and write policies to suit these contexts.

## **Practice**

This study revealed the inadequate human and physical resources available to RRR schools when enacting policies. Despite incentives and planning, RRR schools continue to have high staff turnover rates. To overcome this challenge, it is recommended that staff undergo specific training prior to engaging in RRR schools. Training should focus on challenges associated with living in an RRR area (including the geographical and social implications), teaching diverse student populations and building relationships with RRR communities. Professional development in these areas would allow both teachers and leaders to understand the community in which they are enacting policies and provide them with necessary knowledge and skills. While there are targeted programs already established, this review has highlighted that resourcing these programs remains difficult and implementation of these programs is tokenistic. This review recommends that mentorship programs become available to leaders and teachers. To engage in professional development and enact policies successfully, RRR schools and staff need improved access to resources and funding. This should come in the form of access to online resources and professional development and greater collaboration between RRR schools.

## **Research**

Completing this literature review revealed gaps in the research. First, the extent and impact of RRR community participation in policy enactment is not currently apparent. Enacting policies in place acknowledges the important role community members have in adapting policies to respond to the unique needs of the RRR context. Research gaining school community perspectives of how best to contextualise policies to suit RRR context is needed. Second, research about the effectiveness of funding in RRR areas was limited. Although there have been some state and territory studies evaluating how funding affects RRR student and school outcomes, there is no nationally consistent data. Further research would identify any economic injustice occurring in RRR areas. It is important that further research pertaining to RRR contexts eventuates from rural educators and researchers who understand the complexities of RRR communities.

## **Limitations**

This research faced several limitations. First, this literature review was limited to understanding the policy contextualization process in Australian RRR schools. As education documents and contexts vary across Australia and around the world, the information in this review cannot be applied to other contexts. Second, given the geographic and demographic diversity of RRR areas in Australia, it is unlikely that this paper covers all specificities of each RRR context. Third,

although care was taken to locate, analyse and report data from relevant state and national literature, some literature may not have been accessed because they were outside search parameters. Finally, as the researcher is an RRR educator, researcher bias was inevitable during literature interpretation. Care and consideration was taken to avoid such bias and in some cases, it was deemed useful to have an understanding of the specificities of RRR context. As an RRR educator and researchers, the researcher was able to use knowledge and experience of the research phenomenon and use it in ways that enhanced the design, implementation and interpretation of this study. Despite these limitations, this research contains important implications for RRR schools wanting to adapt policies to suit their context and should be used to guide RRR schools in policy enactment.

## Conclusion

This thematic literature review explains that understanding context in Australia is deeply embedded in geography, place and space. Despite researchers and educators emphasising the importance of context in education, the analysed literature revealed a consensus that state and national policies are largely standardized and placeless. To improve contextualisation, policies should be enacted through a school's unique situated, professional, material and external context. Together, these dimensions suggest that understanding policy enactment in RRR areas is a complex process. However, this research argues that policy makers, researchers and educators need to consider their individual school context if policies are to be successfully enacted to suit the school and the community. To achieve this, further place based research, professional development, access to resources and understanding rurality is required.

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